

2023 State of the County

Howard County Executive Calvin Ball

Tuesday, October 24, 2023

Howard Community College

Theme: **Next Stops on the Road to Excellence**

Good evening and welcome.

During the last five years, it has been an absolute honor to serve as your Howard County Executive.

With consistent collaboration and partnership, each one of us will continue to ensure that Howard County is the best place to live, work, play, grow and thrive for all.

We endured one of the most challenging times in our history. However, throughout it all, Howard County remains a national model for response, recovery, and resilience.

Our bold, transformational vision has always been data informed and people driven. We will continue to be at the forefront of sparking innovation, investing in education, protecting our environment, and strengthening our communities.

The state of Howard County is strong.

I believe our biggest, boldest, and brightest days are ahead, as we journey towards the next stop on the road to excellence.

However, we know that right now, many in our community are hurting. We have seen the increased terror, turmoil, and despair in Israel and Palestine. The shock, pain, and grief from these events continues to reverberate across our community.

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The unconscionable attacks on innocent people, including young people, babies, and the elderly must be condemned in the strongest terms. With each day that passes, my heart goes out to every person who is suffering in the Middle East, and I pray for the safety of these innocent people.

It is times such as these where we see hate reverberate in our community through Islamophobia and antisemitism. Let us unite to foster a welcoming Howard County, where we can show compassion, love, and empathy to one another.

Let us say in word and deed – hate has no home here.

To that end, tonight, I am committing \$750,000 in grants to protect our sacred houses of worship. [applause]

No matter your faith, or where you reside in Howard County, every one of us should be able to worship freely and safely. This vital funding will deter potential acts of violence and hate crimes to ensure that all our residents are safe and *feel* safe.

In the coming weeks, I will also sign an Executive Order establishing an Interfaith Advisory Council. Comprised of faith leaders in our community, this Council will build and nurture relationships within our inter-faith community. This Council will also provide valuable recommendations to address some of the most pressing matters in our religious communities.

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Through these efforts, we will be the purveyors of peace. We will be the guiding light for those who are hurting most. Let us pray that we will one day achieve peace and justice for all.

As we work together on the difficult challenges of safety and health of our community, we recognize that our hospital emergency room has experienced a growing need, like many across our nation.

To address the growing need, tonight I am excited to announce an investment of \$15 million to the Johns Hopkins Howard County Medical Center. [Applause]

This funding will support expansion so that patients can be treated more quickly and efficiently in the emergency department.

While physical health is vital, so is our mental health. Last year, I provided \$1 million towards an expanded behavioral health unit. This work is building upon our progress on behavioral and mental health, as well as substance misuse disorders.

To push us even further towards the next stop, I am committing another \$1 million to support the mental health needs for patients at the Howard County Medical Center. [Applause]

I want to especially thank the visionary leadership and partnership of President Dr. Shafeeq Ahmed, Johns Hopkins Health System President, Kevin Sowers, and the entire team at Howard County Medical Center, for making these efforts a reality.

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Additionally, our hospital, in partnership with Howard Community College, Chase Brexton, and the Health Department, we will continue to make major progress on maternal health.

The pandemic also reminded us of the importance of ensuring all our residents, from our youngest children to our older adults, have access to critical vaccines. Due to partnerships with our Health Department, private partners like Centennial Medical Group, and our Department of Fire and Rescue Services we can save more lives.

For our next stop in expanding access... Starting on October 30th, our Health Department will be providing special clinics to children under 11. We are the ONLY health department in the state to bring the COVID booster to elementary schools, fortifying our commitment to meeting our community where they are.

For our older adults, tonight, I am pleased to announce that we will offer a Senior clinic at the Bain Center on November 17th. We continue to take the COVID booster and flu shots to our home-bound seniors and those with severe disabilities, regardless of insurance status. In addition, uninsured adults can get the COVID booster and flu shot at our Health Department on Mondays and Fridays.

COVID-19 has had a tremendous toll on our community, and it is important to remember who and what we have lost, while reflecting on how we have persevered.

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I invite you to join me on November 3rd, at 11:00 a.m. as we break ground on Howard County's COVID-19 Memorial in Ellicott City.

This public space will provide an opportunity for us to reflect on such a challenging period in our lives, while serving as a reminder of our resilience *and* a symbol of renewal in our community.

Expanding reliable and accessible housing is a key component of our work to build places that support one another and enable us to grow together.

We know there are barriers that impact access to housing and homeownership. Which is why this week, I will file our comprehensive, transformative Housing Opportunities Meant for Everyone, or HOME, package.

This bundle of legislation will include critical initiatives related rental stability, homeownership and housing our youth. [applause]

Additionally, through our Trust Fund, we are allocating \$1.6 million to Patuxent Commons. This is a visionary, multigenerational project that will include 25% of units set aside for persons with disabilities, ensuring that we are growing inclusively, together.

October is Disability Employment Awareness Month, and we know that expanding our pipeline of workers with developmental disabilities is an important aspect of creating a truly diverse and

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inclusive workforce. However, we know that we can, and we must, do better.

This week, we are working with Economic Development Authority highlighting more than 300 local businesses. These small businesses are the backbone of our community and help drive our economy. I would be remiss if I didn't recognize EDA's new CEO, Jennifer Jones for her visionary leadership. [applause]

Our small businesses vary from cyber security to hospitality. Attracting and retaining our talented workforce means expanding the *types* of jobs available. This year, we included \$1 million for the Workforce Development and Skilled Trades Center right here at HCC.

I am *thrilled* to announce that for our next stop on the road to excellence in workforce investment, we will commit an additional \$10 million to support the building of this transformative Trade Center. [applause]

This center will be a beacon of innovation *and* increase our economic vitality statewide. I want to thank President, Dr. Daria Willis and her entire leadership team for their vision to expand learning and workforce opportunities.

We know that educating all our residents should be at the forefront of everything we do. That is why we will continue to provide record-setting educational investments.

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During the past five years, we provided record funding above the state-mandated Maintenance of Effort for our Howard County Public School System. My most recent budget contained more than \$720 million in recurring funding, which was the largest increase of local funding in Howard County history. [applause]

We know that the success of our students starts early with a strong educational foundation for our youngest learners. Howard County is proudly ahead of schedule in meeting the state-wide mandates of Blueprint implementation, which includes pre-k expansion.

This Spring, our team directed \$22 million in pass-through funding from the State for the renovation of the Faulkner Ridge Center. Formerly an Elementary School, this vacant building will be renovated to create 260 new pre-k seats, expanding pre-k access for our 3-and 4-year old's. [applause]

The Blueprint for Maryland's Future will transform our education system and will require comprehensive changes.

This year, during my visits across the state as President of the Maryland Association of Counties, I heard concerns from leaders in *every* jurisdiction that there must be a careful balance of funding education expansion *while* maintaining essential government services.

We look forward to our continued partnership with Governor Moore's Administration as we work towards responsible and realistic implementation of these important milestones.

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Ongoing progress and prioritization for school construction continues to support renovations and systemic improvements. For the last two years, our team has fully funded the Board of Education's Capital Budget request. We funded the full renovation and addition of Hammond High School. And in August, we also proudly opened Guilford Park High School, our first high school to open since 2005.

While this state-of-the-art facility provides us something to be proud of, we must also focus our efforts on the school facilities that require much-needed improvements. We continue to partner with our school system and Board of Education, so schools like Oakland Mills Middle and Dunloggin Middle are prioritized for renovations.

We also know that as our community continues to grow, so does the need for an additional high school in Elkridge. Since taking office, my team has been working with the State to acquire land that will satisfy Program Open Space conversion requirements.

Last year, we successfully completed the purchase agreement for Camp Ilchester. This confirmed the property's eligibility to construct a high school at Troy Park in Elkridge.

However, we recognize significant additional conversion requirements remain.

Our Elkridge community cannot wait any longer for a high school. Therefore, we will be moving High School 14 away from Troy Park and will begin to evaluate other sites in Elkridge. Tonight, I am proud

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to announce we are committing \$15 million for the site acquisition of High School 14 in Elkridge. [applause]

Planning for our schools and future growth in Howard County was a critical component of our general plan. Last week, I signed HoCo by Design, our comprehensive general plan that will provide a roadmap for land use and conservation for the next 20 years. This three-year long process had historic levels of community engagement.

I want to thank the County Council for passing this critical legislation. Thank you to the many residents and community stakeholders who took part in helping shape the bold future of our county. And I would be remiss if I didn't express my sincere gratitude to the Department of Planning and Zoning for spearheading this herculean effort. [applause]

Howard County remains home to the safest city in Maryland and one of the safest cities in America.

This is due, in part, to our investment of significant resources to expand and improve our public safety along with our first responders.

Our Public Safety professionals are those who run towards danger when others are running away.

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Their dedication and determination to serve and protect our community is unmatched. There are times when they make the ultimate sacrifice.

Recently, Howard County lost our very own Deputy Sheriff Ryan Demby. He was only 23 years old, a shining light, following in his father's footsteps.

And, just last week, our Howard County crews responded to support a two-alarm fire in Baltimore City. Our local volunteer firefighters stepped up their support right here at home. Baltimore City Firefighters Rodney W. Pitts, III died in the line of duty and Lieutenant Dillion Rinaldo remains in critical but stable condition.

Please join me in a moment of silence to recognize our public safety heroes.

Every time our emergency personnel put on their uniforms, there are tremendous risks involved. And we deeply appreciate their bravery. At our next stop on the road to supporting our volunteer firefighters, we will provide \$100,000 to each of our six volunteer corporations next fiscal year.

If you serve or have served as a first responder, please stand to be recognized. [applause]

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As we continue to strive for excellence in emergency response, Howard County became the first ground-based EMS Department to provide whole blood transfusions to critical patients before they reach the hospital. While not every trauma patient will need a blood transfusion, the ability to provide whole blood to critical patients will increase their chances of survival even before they reach the hospital.

Due to partnerships with the University of Maryland Medical Center Shock Trauma, Johns Hopkins Howard County Medical Center, and every medical professional in our region that we can make an impact of this magnitude.

Our first responders are among the most highly trained and sought after in the region. In the Spring of 2023, our Police Department graduated 25 new officers and our current class has 28 new recruits. This is the largest class in over 30 years. We remain dedicated to keeping our communities safe and secure.

We are able to expand our focus on new initiatives as well as those left unfinished.

Additionally, our Police Department and Department of Technology and Communication Services have built a comprehensive database and website dedicated to solving cold cases dating back to 1970's. This initiative will underscore the importance of using modern technology *and* bring closure and justice for families.

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Safe and connected communities are engaged communities.

When we expand access to broadband, we help achieve digital equity. We have worked extensively to ensure that from the rural west to the southeast of the county, our residents are connected.

Through partnerships with the Community Action Council, BGE, and Elkridge Mobile home park, we provide free public WiFi and are committed to expanding to other mobile home communities along the Route 1 corridor.

In addition to the 250 miles of broadband fiber the county originally constructed, within the past 2 years, we have added more than 140 miles. This is critical for countywide continuity, as our network includes *all* county buildings, schools, our hospital, Columbia Association, and most recently, *all* of our libraries.

Additionally, WiFi has been expanded to the Howard County Fairgrounds - which was never previously available.

For the next stop on the road to excellence in digital equity, we are partnering with the Columbia Association to provide broadband connectivity to their facilities, including 6 village centers and all 23 pools

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Our outdoor parks and public facilities are a core centerpiece of our community. To date, Recreation and Parks has acquired more than 9,900 acres of public parkland and open space.

This year, we will purchase additional properties and exceed 10,000 acres of County-owned parkland. When that acquisition is complete, we will have nearly 30,000 acres in Howard County.

We have some of the most beautiful, engaging parks in our nation. Tonight, I am pleased to announce \$400,000 to begin design for a destination Public Garden, right here in Howard County. This garden will include trees and flowers that are native to our region.

We continue to excel with a growing, national favorite pastime: pickleball. We recently opened eight standalone pickleball courts at Western Regional Park and added eight more blended lines to the newly renovated tennis courts. Now, 16 pickleball games can be played simultaneously there.

As we travel on the road to excellence in access to pickleball, in my upcoming proposed budget, I will request funding for six additional pickleball courts at Blandair Regional Park in Columbia, bringing the total number of county-owned courts to nearly 80.

To create even more spaces for members of our community to gather, I am committing:

- \$1.5 million to start the planning and design for a future, word-class, multi-sheet Ice Rink

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- And \$20 million for the previously-designed, shovel ready North Laurel Pool

We understand the importance of expanding capital projects that improve the quality of life for our residents.

This past year, we continued to upgrade our playgrounds, walking paths, open spaces, and parks to welcome people of all ages and abilities. On the road to inclusionary excellence, we will open a sensory path and playground at Centennial Park North. This will be a place for children of all abilities.

We are also responding to needs for individuals with disabilities, their families and caretakers and have installed adult changing tables at three of our community centers, with additional locations in planning and development phases.

As we emerged from the pandemic, we saw the need for our young people to have greater access to safe and engaging environments where they can recreate and interact with each other in a positive way. This past year, we provided more than \$1 million to local organizations in Youth Engagement Programing, or YEP!, grants to support our young people. [applause]

We also know that the voices of our young people should be at the forefront of our efforts. To bring the voices of more young people to the table, we established the Youth Engagement Leadership Workgroup comprised of 27 students from around our county.

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These emerging leaders bring diverse backgrounds and perspectives when discussing pressing issues impacting their generation and our future.

I encourage you to join this engaged workgroup for their Youth Voices Town Hall. If you are a member of the Youth Engagement Leadership Workgroup, please stand to be recognized. [applause]

As we continue on the road to excellence, I am announcing \$3 million for community centers in Howard County. [applause]

The first stop includes a \$1.5 million investment in planning to launch an important new gathering space in Columbia.

We will work with the innovative team of Columbia Concepts to reimagine the site of the iconic Columbia Flier building as a new center for recreation and community services.

In partnership with, Columbia Community Cares, the vision of Columbia Concepts includes a dedicated childcare space, recreation for our young people, spaces for multigenerational gatherings and a productive place to gather in the heart of downtown Columbia.

The next stop is a Community Center in ElkrIDGE, with an investment of \$1.5 million to immediately launch planning and design. We know that our ElkrIDGE Community deserves a place where our children can play sports, do homework, or enjoy time with friends. This

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center has been a longtime coming for our Elkridge Community, and I'm excited to work with you to bring the vision into reality.

Additionally, with an investment of \$1.5 million, we will begin the planning and design of an Indoor Track facility at Troy Park at Elkridge. Now, Troy Park at Elkridge will become a regional destination with significant economic benefits.

Our work to support future generations is comprehensive and transformative, and expanding partnerships to support our young people is a top priority for our community. To continue building on this important work, I am thrilled to share an exciting new partnership between Howard County Government, Howard Community College, and the Boys and Girls Club of Metropolitan Baltimore.

In 2024, our next stop will be to open a Boys and Girls Club for middle and high school students right here at HCC. [applause]

This new Club will provide critical after-school programming and mentorship and support to our young people in nearby neighborhoods. In partnership with the community college, this Boys and Girls Club will be the first of its kind in the state. It will serve as a model for how we can come together to uplift and champion our young people.

Forging new partnerships and re-imagining programmatic space continues to be a focal point.

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When considering the revitalization of the Historic Courthouse in Ellicott City, it was of the utmost importance to engage our community.

After receiving feedback from more than 600 community stakeholders, it was evident that we must prioritize the space for cultural and civic uses.

The next exciting stop for our Historic Courthouse will be a transformative Center for Arts, Culture, and History. The anchors of this vibrant community center will be:

- The Howard County Center for the Arts
- The Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) Cultural Center
- Roving Radish Marketplace and
- Shared commercial kitchen space

This plan maintains the ongoing small business and artisan community in Historic Ellicott City and has the potential to increase economic activity in the area by bringing more natural foot traffic to retail and restaurants.

As we continue our efforts to champion and celebrate the arts, *tonight*, in partnership with the Howard County Arts Council and HoCoPoLitSo, I'm excited to announce the establishment of Howard

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County's first Poet Laureate and Youth Poet Laureate program [applause]

As the first program of its kind in Howard County, this competitive initiative will put a spotlight and focus on our incredible poetry and literature community right here at home. I want to thank the members of the Howard County Arts Council Board who unanimously approved this program. [applause]

As we modernize and incorporate our inclusive values in everything we do, tonight, I am announcing the establishment of a commission to redesign our county flag, which was adopted nearly 55 years ago. I want to thank members of the flag commission here this evening and the Chair of this forthcoming process, Coleen West, who serves as Executive Director of the Howard County Center for the Arts.

This commission will oversee the guidelines, public submission, and review process that will result in the selection of a brand-new flag design that encompasses Howard County's past, present and future.

Following the move of our Center for the Arts to the Historic Courthouse in Ellicott City, we will build upon the progress we made with our Harriet Tubman Cultural Center. The current site of the Howard County Center for the Arts, will become the new space for our local, black Greek letter nonprofits. [Applause]

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For the first time in Howard County, there will be dedicated space for our historically black fraternities and sororities to meet and offer key programs for our community.

These chapters do incredible work in our community, including youth mentoring programs, college and career fairs, scholarships, food drives and more.

This will be a national model of collaboration for service. Thank you to all our community members who are members of these dedicated organizations who have done so much for our community.

To serve our community as an educational and recreational space, it is important that Belmont Manor and Historic Park in Elkridge remains open and accessible to the public.

I am excited that we will now resume its *free* community events. I invite you all to Belmont's Fall Open House.

Preserving historic sites and protecting our environment continues to be a cornerstone.

In June of this year, we announced the permanent preservation of environmentally sensitive land in Elkridge owned by the non-profit, Holy-Trinity Russian Orthodox Church. In partnership with the Howard County Conservancy, this acquisition was made possible by our innovative Purchased Conservation Easement Pilot Program.

Tonight, I'm proud to share the next stop on the road to land conservation in Howard County. Through this important initiative we will soon protect an additional eight acres of land owned by the

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North St. Johns Swim & Tennis Club, a non-profit organization in Ellicott City. I want to thank Conservancy Executive Director, Meg Boyd, and her entire team who help administer this program.

In 2021, before Howard County entered into the largest solar Power Purchase Agreement in Maryland, we had several small demonstration solar projects on County buildings that provided less than 2% of electricity for County government operations.

Today, three years into the PPA, Howard County receives 47% of the electricity needed for County government operations from solar. To date, solar arrays have been installed on our roofs, parking canopies, and ground mount sites on county and private properties.

These solar installations are expected to generate as much as 35.6 million kilowatts per year, which is the equivalent of powering nearly 3,000 homes each year or planting of more than 250,000 trees. Three more projects are under design and permitting. We expect at least 55% of County government operations to be powered by solar within the next two years.

In addition to increasing solar and EV initiatives, our Climate Action and Resiliency Plan calls for the significant expansion of our tree canopy.

In fact, by 2030, we will add 640 acres of trees, expanding our total tree canopy to 50% of the County's land area. In order to reach this milestone, we will invest \$3 million into our Private Forest

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Conservation Program. This initiative allows us to protect forests from future development. [applause]

Since 2019, we have planted or given away more than 68,000 trees in our community and today, I am committing \$1.5 million to aggressively grow our tree planting and give away programs. [applause]

We will also launch a ‘Tree Savers’ management program. Partnering with trained volunteers, we will identify and remove harmful invasives from forests throughout Howard County.

Investments today will ensure progress with incredible outcomes in the future.

We continue to make important progress on flood mitigation and resilience through our long-range, comprehensive Ellicott City Safe and Sound Plan.

Recently, Governor Moore and members of his cabinet spent time at several of our EC Safe and Sound sites to gain an understanding of the devastating impacts of the 2011, 2016, and 2018 floods.

Governor Moore saw first-hand the need for continued investment in such a historic and economically vital community.

Since taking office, we have made tremendous progress as part of our EC Safe and Sound plan. This includes the completion of our H7 Dry Mitigation Pond, Quaker Mill Retention Pond, the completion of

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an outdoor tone alert systems, installing high ground signage, and the establishment of a stream debris cleaning program.

Today, I am excited to share two new milestones in our EC Safe and Sound Plan. This summer, we will break ground on our H4 Flood Mitigation Pond. [applause]

Located along Frederick Road, this stormwater retention project will hold more than 5.5 million gallons of water during storm events. This critical project will continue to reduce water flow on Main Street further our flood mitigation goals.

The previous plan would have removed ten historic buildings in Ellicott City. Under *our* EC Safe and Sound Plan, we made a commitment to scale back the loss of historic architecture on Lower Main Street to just four structures and developed plans to preserve and renovate the six remaining historic buildings.

And now, we will begin the building removal work on Lower Main Street starting **this** January. [applause]

This is the first step to realizing our vision for an expanded Tiber Park and the continued revitalization of Lower Main Street.

As we advance these two important projects, our team will continue to work diligently with CSX to finalize design and approvals for the Extended North Tunnel and Maryland Avenue Culvert.

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I want to thank our Historic Ellicott City community for your perseverance and efforts to ensure that Ellicott City's best days are ahead.

But improved infrastructure extends beyond Ellicott City. Connected communities are thriving communities and our bold vision and commitment to infrastructure investment has earned national accolades.

Our Complete Streets Policy was recently recognized as the *best* in the nation by Smart Growth America. Howard County is the first jurisdiction to receive a *perfect score*.

This year's budget included more than \$13 million for Complete Streets projects. This recognition reflects our commitment to prioritizing pedestrians, bicyclists, transit riders, drivers, and all road users.

To further enhance the safety and connectivity of walking routes, our team expedited more than 85 infrastructure improvements for the school year.

This work included installing 20 new crosswalks, ADA ramps, sidewalks, pathways, and signage projects, as well as refreshing and repainting more than 65 existing crosswalks throughout Howard County.

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As we continue to invest in community enhancements for Elkridge, I am also excited to announce the creation the Troy Park Neighborhood Connections Project.

This multimillion-dollar investment will be targeted to improve walkability and multimodal transportation access between Troy Park and nearby residential communities in Elkridge.

We are making strides to not only expand our public transportation routes, but also modernize how our community utilizes the RTA. This year, we are excited to announce that our free student bus passes are now digital through the Transit app. This transition to digital passes will help more students access public transportation to travel to school, work, and other parts of Howard County.

On the next stop on the road to excellence in being a multimodal system for all ages and abilities, I'm happy to announce that I will prefile our 5-year Transit Development Plan this week.

Howard County remains a model community for jurisdictions across our nation. This year, we received a record 52 NACo awards, including a best in category for transportation.

And we received double the amount of awards than any other county in the state of Maryland.

Just a few months ago, we hosted the Moore-Miller Administrations "Cabinet for a Day." During their time here, they witnessed why

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Howard County is the best place to live, work, play, grow, and thrive for all.

I want to express sincere appreciation for your continued faith and trust in our team. Serving as your Howard County Executive has been one of the most challenging yet rewarding experiences of my life.

We have faced hardship and uncertainty, but the goal remains working for our community and establishing the best quality of life, not just overall, but for all.

Together, we will think bigger, grow bolder, and shine brighter to shape the future of Howard County.

I truly believe that our best days are ahead as we journey to the next stop on the road to excellence, together.

Thank you and God bless our county, our state, our nation and our world.